



Summer Sanders
Kilpara (crow)
 2010
 painted glass
 47.5 x 47.5 cm



Paul Sanders
Archaisian Fragment
 1993
 slumped glass, post-kiln fired patination, concrete
 27 x 41 x 12 cm

Summer, you make specific reference to place in your work?

Summer: Yes, I am coming from an indigenous aspect – with my family ties to country, which is out near Menindee in western NSW. I am specifically drawing from my own personal experience – going out there and engaging in cultural practices with my family and there are stories associated with that. So there are traditional indigenous stories that I'm relating to as well. There is a lot of landscape referred to in that.

Paul: They are place specific.

Summer: Yes, they are site specific. A lot of my work revolves around a place called Mt Manara, which is a very important site and it also relates to the Darling River – waterholes and those sorts of things out there are iconic markers for some people. They relate to the stories directly.

Is there a ritual aspect to this?

Summer: I would not say ritual.

Paul: Along with Summer I've worked with a lot of indigenous artists and what I've found is that with some stories there is not a lot of room for interpretation in regards to that story. If the story is A/B/C, then A can be used, B can be used, or C can be used, or any part there of, for that to be that story. You can't put in D/E, or F and say it is the same story.

You are working within conventions?

Paul: Yes, from an oral aspect in the sense of story telling. If we were to talk of *Three Bears* and then go and paint it, you are probably going to see a bear in that picture. It is the same with indigenous art when you are talking about the rainbow serpent coming out of a waterhole, then you are probably going to see that waterhole.

I have found (particularly with the men) there is less individual input. They may have a style, but they are rigid as to that storytelling. It is like a map, but speaking generally the women involved in indigenous art, their work uses more of their imagination.

Summer: Emily Kngwarreye for example,

Paul: Minnie Pwerle, Dorothy Napangardi would be other ones, but not to the same degree. The women tend to bring more imagination to the stories. The men are very driven and specific. If it is Tingari Dreaming Cycle [Ronnie Tjampitjinpa] you are going to get these squares and that is it – you are going to see squares, squares and squares, where the women do other things with it.

With Summer's work, being site specific, if you wanted to know what the story was you could pull up a map and she could show you exactly where that story was - the Menindee Lakes and also Mt Manaro, which is roughly half way between Ivanhoe and Wilcannia. The colour usage, the interpretation of the artist and whether they are going to use A and C, or B and A, is what goes into the telling of that story.

You select within the conventions of the story?

Summer: Absolutely. Being landscaped based I have a lot more room to play within the stories. Because it is all based on landscape I am not being specific to the traditional story.

Paul: But all this is specific to stories.

You represent with abstractions?

Summer: Absolutely, yes. I see myself as a free painter. My style is very expressionistic, very fluid. I am allowing the paint to do a lot of what it would like to do. I give it space to breath and do its thing as well. I am not conventional about my approach to painting.

Paul: Summer says that, but what I see when she works, is a lot of experience. It is almost like watching someone doing enamelling on copper. If I tried it I would make a horrible mess, but someone who has been doing it for a while tends to create something far more interesting.

Embodied skill allows that fluidity.

Paul: Hearing Summer say that she, "Allows the paint to breath", I can tell you that she knows exactly how much breathing it needs (laughs).

We are talking about powders with medium on glass?

Summer: Yes.

Because of technical aspects glass is quite convention bound.

Absolutely.

Then why glass?

I have always been in glass. Both my parents were lead lighters. I started out lead lighting and I studied in Melbourne in stained glass and lead lighting. I have always had an interest in glass from my family, and of course, I met Paul along that journey. We have very similar ideas in our art and in our approach to glass and in trying to push the boundaries in technique.

Paul: To answer that question, it probably goes back to my days in university in Wagga with Denis O'Connor. At the time the Wagga [glass] facility, being one of the first in the country, was primitive and had not developed.

Mid-eighties?

Paul: Towards the end of the eighties, it hadn't really developed in terms of numbers, and yet it produced significant artists out of that hot shop. I was lucky enough to work under Alex Metrovic, who was a first generation Australian glassmaker, and then Denis O'Connor in my second year. One approach from Alex (through the JamFactory) was that you needed to know all the skills. Whereas Denis's approach was, "What do you want to make today?" If you said you wanted to make a goblet he would pull his hair out and start rocking in the corner.

You're a hot glass worker?

Paul: Yes. I went off with *raku glass*, which is pushing the boundaries of glassmaking. I had conversations with Denis as an Australian glassmaker - what Australia could show the world - what was our identity in glass? Would we follow the Venetian model, the Americans in team glass blowing (four or five guys making one piece)? Where do we fit as a glassmaking nation? New Zealand was getting into casting glass and their identity was very much in kiln work. Warren Langley and Brian Hirst were kicking goals out in the world, but aside from those two there wasn't a lot going on. You can go back and look at the *Wagga National Art Glass* collection and you will notice a big gap from about 1989 to maybe the mid nineties. They stopped that survey show [*Wagga National Studio Glass Exhibition* (Triennial)] because they were embarrassed. It had got to the point where the show was very good, but that last show [1991] there were no ideas. It was all bowls - little, big and medium sized bowls. They had been looking at touring that show around the world and they cancelled it. It stopped after that and I was devastated, because I had entered that show many times and I really believed in it. It had given me my head start and I had seen it as a proving ground for artists.

There would have been the technical virtuosity.

Paul: The success of glass had actually caught up with it. People who had grants were very good at making glass and could make a living from that. All of a sudden those guys became slaves to their furnaces. It had gone full circle. The guy challenging himself with ideas and the medium at a small furnace had turned into a guy at the furnace door wondering how he was going to pay his next gas bill. These exhibitions stated to reflect their production lines. At that point it became a 'put up or shut up' argument - you were either a glass blower, or you were an artist. If you look at the US market there are two distinct areas - the 'Chilhulis and company' making artworks (Billy Morris for example) and then thousands of guys making production work - they know their place and don't take their works off to New York galleries.

Kiln working allows a different approach. You can be more contemplative.

Paul: Yes, but you still have to make a living. Then again with kiln work you can be an accountant, or cleaner five days a week, come home at night and put something in the kiln and what is put in the kiln will be expressive artwork. To me that would probably be your true glass artist, because they are not driven by the need to cover expenses.

What drives you Summer?

Summer: Ideally I would be just making art, but I do have a mortgage to pay (laughs), so I do production here on a daily basis, but all my production work is hand painted. Every piece is an individual artwork and I enjoy making every piece – whether it is a coaster, or a canoe. I put in as much effort in each production item as I do in my exhibition work.

Paul: As a studio we need that production line work whether it is Summer working, or one of the other guys we had in the big studio. They all start on coasters and as they become proficient in skills they go into the bigger stuff, because there is more money there and they can start to be more expressive. It is very much a right hand/left hand deal within our studio, but the monster that Summer has created is that, of all the artists we have dealt with, her work is the most popular. As an artist she is now producing beautiful artworks on eighty-dollar bowls, because that is what she is going to do regardless.

These are her canvasses?

Paul: That is exactly it. Whoever is buying an eighty-dollar bowl is getting a bargain (laughs).

A fifteen hundred dollar painting on an eighty-dollar bowl?

Paul: Exactly, but that is what keeps her sane.

Summer: If I didn't have the freedom to express myself day to day in production, then there would be no point in me doing this.

You are involved with international exhibition?

Summer: Yes, I just had a show in Rotterdam, where I created about two hundred and fifty pieces of glass. They were mixed forms.

Paul: The show is on-line.

Summer: The gallery [*Aboriginal Art Gallery (was Global Art)* in Rotterdam] dictated it a little bit, because he knows his market base over there. He did request some production items in the show, so my bowls are in the show, but there are also my more expressive forms – my grinding stones and coolamons. Forms that allow me to express what I want to get across – that would be more my idea of an exhibition piece. It is a bit more modern, but still with that traditional element.

You are driven to do this?

Summer: Absolutely. I have total passion in what I do. There are probably a couple of elements to that. I have always been a creative person and I have been working in glass since I was fifteen. I've always had a passion for glass in particular, but the drive

is for the art itself – whether it's glass, or canvas, or anything, I have a need in me to create art.

You hinted at 'identity'?

Summer: Yes, in the stories behind the artworks. That takes me back to the country where my family comes from – where mother was born. The whole cultural aspect of my family comes out in the artwork itself. When I'm painting I am always taken back home I guess.

Paul: That's a recent thing for Summer. When I first started the studio Summer was working with me as a technician. She was teaching the other artists and it wasn't until three years ago when they did the 'family tree' thing with the family that the ghosts started to come out of the closet. There has been a rift in her family in regards to it all, but it basically came down to some undisputable things. Summer has been out to that country now. She met people, she camped in that country and she has done cultural activities in that country. As her partner what I am seeing is that it has become very, very important to her – her identity. I have seen that in a lot of artists that have come through our door. The guys from Alice Springs don't have that baggage. They know who they are and where they fit, but here in Albury we have guys as white as a sheet of paper that have gone through a similar thing to Summer and it gets quite emotional in the studio sometimes. There are girls, when I ask what they would like to be in life, say they would really like to be a barmaid and I say, "I think there is a bit more to you than that". Then they start making glass jewellery and become involved with the studio practice and other things start to become important to them – things like their culture, things like who they are. The studio sometimes acts as a vehicle for that, but it also acts as a bank in its ability to support them financially through things they can make.

That is where the production evolved for us. When we first got involved with this, it was to create that Australian identity in glass.

Through an indigenous identity?

Yes, that's where I believe it could only come from. If you looked at Warren Langley's work it was *Druid Site* stuff. It was drawing on his European background. When you look at Ben Edols etc, it is 'Venetian' techniques from Europe. Then there is the American model, which came either from Europe, or a way out abstraction from the belief that they had invented glass and no one else knew what they were doing. So where did Australia fit?

In the late nineties when I came back from my many trips overseas, I quickly realised that Australian campuses had done very well opening the gallery doors in the US and indigenous works were commanding the right money at that time as serious twentieth century art. It had a 'Wow' impact. Over many years I had dabbled over how to get Australian indigenous iconography onto glass in an economic and direct way.

Summer: 'Direct way' more importantly I think.

Paul: Yes the 'direct way' was more important. It couldn't come from glass blowing, because there was so much training involved. It couldn't come from grabbing some one and just teaching them kiln work without there being a monetary return. It couldn't come from hours standing at the sandblaster. In painting what I'd found was a medium that could go very easily onto normal float glass.

Low fire enamels?

Paul: Yes, and it worked. If you could paint with a dot brush, you could paint with these enamels and that catapulted the whole studio concept into a reality.

Do you go through some form of 'body action' in painting?

Summer: Yes!

Paul: It had to be as direct as painting. If an indigenous artist could paint a canvas, it had to be as easy for them to paint the glass. If it wasn't that easy it wouldn't work.

Technique had to disappear as a barrier?

Paul: Exactly. It had to be at its simplest form painting on glass.

Summer: As you would paint on a canvas, or any other medium.

Paul: Everything else we tried would fall over with boredom, frustration, lack of financial return, or costings would be blown out into the stratosphere. As a studio we found something we could afford to nurture and that at the same time would be a direct process for the artist to be authentically involved in. At the end of the day this was the full package.

As you know with me being a hot worker it wasn't a question of, "I'll blow the work for you and you do this". It just became your work goes into that box [kiln] and it's irrelevant who pushes the buttons. That was the magic. It sounds very simple, but this took fifteen years (laughs).

It's working well for your group of people?

Summer: Yes. I started the studio with Paul ten years ago. We started *Bonegilla Glass* as a joint venture.

Paul: And that was only going to be short term. The idea was let's develop something that we can then take to TAFE colleges as a model, then do all over the country. Just as you have the painting studios for indigenous artists, you would have all these glass studios. It didn't work out that way (laughs).

Summer: If you want to come from a cultural aspect, it is not too far from sand painting to painting on glass. I use a medium, but I have also done dry powder enamelling as well. There are all sorts of techniques we have developed with glass, but if you want to get down to the alchemy of glass – you have silica and all those basic things.

Paul: It is probably culturally closer and more significant than a canvas. At the end of the day you are using sand. You are freezing that image, rather than having it flow into the desert.

Sometimes glassmakers are seen as magicians. People wonder how we do it.

Summer: That's not a bad thing, is it? I believe anything is possible if you put your mind to it. I think that any medium is there to be used and it doesn't matter what

cultural background you are coming from. We are all living in the twentieth century and there are elements out there that we can all work with, glass is just my chosen element.

Paul: It is not a static culture. A blackfella driving a four-wheel drive and using a rifle makes perfect sense to him in putting food on the table for his family out at Indimoo. Sometimes visitors have a different expectation.

Summer – with your forms are you working within a convention?

Summer: I certainly have a production line of work and I am working to orders, so it is always a set amount of forms. That is roughly a dozen production items.

Are these evolving?

Summer: Yes they are, my exhibition work particularly. There I push the edges a bit. As I said before, the production line is paying the mortgage and keeping the studio doors open. What people are ordering is what I am making and that keeps me very busy. It is really only when I am having my exhibitions that I get the chance to push form and techniques. Having said that Paul is pulling out some of my pieces.

Paul: These are some of the fun pieces Summer's made and you will see there is engraving, which is more the cultural aspect. You are involving a traditional practice of engraving, but on cast glass with copper. These are only small, but she did these in a workshop and used enamels again on the back.

Summer: I was planning to make these larger.

Paul: This is the fun part for Summer and this is where the ideas get pushed. This is how to move a 2D work to a 3D work related to a site you visited. These are the boundaries she is pushing.

A new view within the conventions of the culture?

Paul and Summer: Yes.

At the international level, aren't they looking for a unique voice?

Paul: Yes. I don't mean to be flippant, but with Summer now it is almost like Picasso painting plates. The work on the plate is an original Picasso, but it will not have the status as the same action on a canvas. Yet it is a 'Picasso' and still an original piece of work. That's what Summer's doing at the moment. This is our dilemma as artists and as a studio. This monster we have in Summer as an artist – these bowls, that are so beautiful and embody everything we were about, yet even if we tripled the price of them they would still be too cheap. I have had arguments with galleries, when I say this one is \$2,000, but really I think it should be \$4,000 wholesale. Where do you put the value now? That is the problem – we started as a production studio – the artworks are strong and we are starting to get success, but what does she offer her gallery and her public?

A production item is sold for \$80, not \$8,000.

Paul and Summer: Yes, exactly!

Paul: So now we have to separate Summer's work practice and reinvent.

This is the 'international strategy'?

Paul: Yes. That's where these maquettes are the starting point. We are starting to play with ideas that can compete on an international level. This is not saying her ideas don't work on the bowls, but at the end of the day they start waving the finger if the price rises.

Summer: They start comparing prices.

Paul: How we are going to separate those is a mystery at the moment.

Summer: It is a dinner conversation we have nearly every night. Personally as an artist I would like to push the edges and create sculpture. Sculpture is where it is at for me as an artist. Exactly where I am going to go in pushing that leaves me having arguments in my own head, but I certainly have a lot of ideas.

Paul: I am calling it 'the excitement of success'.

Summer: (laughs)

Paul: It is how you adapt, how you free yourself up. I think she is at a good point in her life. I think she is at a good point in her artistic life and she can say, "I have worked hard enough I deserve the freedom". That is a good place to be as an artist. We all strive for that as artists.

Those small objects look as though, with the smallest jump, they could be installations?

Summer: That is where I see this heading. I see them a million times the size they are here (laughs).

Paul: Landscape. Things that come into play where we are – geography becomes a constraint with shipping, finance and those things. Summer has made some quite large pieces and \$10,000 to \$20,000 wouldn't be unrealistic. You would see the value in it. The problem we then have is how to get this from A to B, how do we successfully manage that? That constrains your freedom as an artist.

Logistics?

Paul and Summer: Exactly!

Paul: and with glass, it is a big one.

You are establishing a base with an overseas gallery?

Summer: We have been working with this gallery [*Aboriginal Art Gallery, Rotterdam*] for a number of years now. Contracts have been exchanged and he is now acting as my agent for Europe, and he is also talking to some galleries in the States and trying to organise some things for me there. He is trying to push me internationally, which is fantastic.

As a contemporary artist?

Summer: As a contemporary indigenous artist, and I think that is definitely where it needs to go. It comes to the things I would like to make and the things I can logistically send. I have to work that out (laughs).

In this field the price points are much more realistic.

Paul: The thing with establishing an agent, they start to take over that role for you and this is something new for my generation of artists. I've been exposed to it, because I have lived in the US and I've been to Canada and they are fifty years ahead with Arts managers and their whole gallery system. Having an agent now acting on Summer's behalf in Europe, taking care of the freight, taking care of the marketing – they're big things, this can free her up, but they do come at a cost.

Now people are counting on you.

Summer: That's right.

Paul: It does come as a cost on your bottom line: It's a service you are paying for. They are doing it to make money. No matter how we see ourselves as free artists, they still look at us as a product.

But you want that freedom.

Summer: So I can make the art. It's a brilliant position to be in and I'm very lucky. I had some amazing comments whilst I was over there. I discovered there were actually people there who have been collecting my work for several years and who had come to the gallery specifically to meet me and purchase the next piece for their *Summer Sanders* collection. I didn't know that existed out there. That was a big for me, and it was very humbling. The Australian ambassador opened the show for me and her husband was born here in Albury, so it is a small world.

The Summer Sanders Collection?

Summer: I know. It sounds bizarre to me, but it is lovely that people appreciate my work so much. The people over there really take the time, they came into the gallery and they spent two or three hours talking with me – telling me where the piece is in their home.